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AUTHOR Procunier, Robert W.
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ABSTRACT

Serious drawbacks can be cited for almost every form of student performance evaluation. The typical A-B-C-D report seldom tells anything really meaningful; the arguments against this system are many--unless you have straight A offspring. Written comments or reports are good if they tell, in a meaningful way, what the student is accomplishing in school. But teachers often lapse into cliches or vague generalizations, and the comments often reflect a teacher's personal reaction to the child, rather than a report of academic progress. The parent-teacher conference is valuable if it is well planned and conducted, and if sufficient time is allowed for the conference. One other point--all conferences should include the student as well as the parent and teacher. If a child is to grow socially, emotionally, and intellectually, he or she must participate in the evaluation of the process. During the last two years, our district has been moving toward an individualized curricular program. To make our reporting procedure more effective, we must add to our trait checklist, with comments, a summarization of the basic skills attained by each child. This tells the parent just what specific skills the child has acquired as a result of his school work. (Author/JG)

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Remarks

by

DR. ROBERT W. PROCUNIER
Superintendent of Schools
School District No. 146
Tinley Park, Illinois

EFFECTIVE STUDENT GRADING AND PROGRESS REPORTING

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ROBERT W. PROCUNIER

REMARKS TO NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS
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EFFECTIVE STUDENT GRADING AND PROGRESS REPORTING

The title of the clinic frightens me a bit because I am beginning to wonder if there is an effective way to grade students and report their progress to parents in a meaningful way.

The longer I am in this business, the more I become concerned about some of the methods we use. And, the more I view reactions to change, the more convinced I become that we will never find a totally effective or acceptable tool for reporting pupil progress. That being true, maybe we should adjourn and go outside to soak up the sunshine.

Like so much of what we do in education, reporting of pupil progress seems to have to be controversial. Seldom can we get agreement on what is appropriate, desirable and/or acceptable. Several examples come to mind which support this idea:

Several years ago, in a district where I was employed, we were undertaking a review of our reporting procedure. Our superintendent sent some materials to our school board members to get their reactions and suggestions.

After a rather lengthy discussion, there was still no consensus among the 7 board members as to what approach would seem appropriate to them. One felt that the standard A, B, C, D approach was fine and that through it, he knew "exactly" where his child stood. Another felt that a checklist of behavior traits and skills acquired was accurate enough to tell what his child was accomplishing. A third felt that a conference with the teacher was essential; in

fact the only effective way for him to know the full story of what his child was accomplishing in school.

The most vocal and stubborn response came from the school board president, who held that all papers were to be graded and averaged for a report to the parent. A grade of 83.2 was, to him, the only reasonable and accurate report of his child's progress. After all, that is what he experienced as a child and if it was good enough for him it was good enough for his children. So it is with so many people; they are most comfortable with that which they have experienced.

Parents (and board members) are not the only ones who are dissatisfied with reporting practices. Teachers are also in on the game. One day in October, several years ago, a bright, young, beginning 4th grade teacher came to me and said, "Bob, we've got to do something about our report cards. They just don't do justice to the kids nor do they allow us an opportunity to convey to parents all that we should." What she did not know, but soon learned, was that a committee of teachers and administrators had spent most of the last school year devising the report card she had just written off as useless.

That's not all ancient history. This year we initiated a new program in our district. At a meeting in early January, a parent asked why our program was so devoid of real meaning. "Why," she asked, "couldn't she get a comparison of her child's performance in relation to others in his class?" We explained that the program was new this year and, if she would only be patient and allow us to go through the full reporting cycle for the year, she would

probably find out what she wanted to know.

With most educators, I've gotten to the point where I view the traditional A-B-C-D report card as inappropriate. Yet, there appears to be a reverse swing of public opinion back to a longing for such reports. As educators, we must take the lead in informing parents about what is going on in school and in evaluating their children's reaction to the school experience. I think the term we have been using is accountability.

One of the most difficult assignments a teacher faces is the evaluation of students' performance. Serious drawbacks can be cited for almost every form that the evaluation process takes. The controversy over grading practices is an old one. I am sure many of you are familiar with the book, "Wadja Get?" by Kirschenbaum, Napier and Simon.[1] In it, the authors trace the circuitous history of grading practices in American schools.

The typical A-B-C-D report program is unfair because it seldom tells anyone anything really meaningful about what is going on in the school. One teacher's A is the next teacher's B (or C). One grade reflects academic proficiency in light of some standard (often arbitrarily derived), while another involves a recognition of effort as well as achievement. The arguments against this system are many--unless you happen to have sired a straight A offspring; then the system is great.

Written comments or reports are good if they tell, in a meaningful way, what the student is accomplishing in school. But, with the seemingly ever increasing load of paperwork, teachers often lapse into hackneyed cliches or vague generalizations such as,

"excellent," "fine worker," "needs improvement" or "not working up to potential." Such reports tell the parents precious little about their child's progress in school. More often, the comments reflect a teacher's personal reaction to the child, rather than a report of academic progress.

The parent-teacher conference is valuable if it is well planned and conducted, and <u>if</u> there is sufficient time allowed for the conference. 20 minutes is adequate--if well planned--but not if the teacher must conduct 18 to 25 conferences during one day.

The technique of good parent-teacher conferences is not learned in one in-service session, yet too often we schedule teachers into the process with very little, if any, specific training.

One other point about parent-teacher conferences. Don't forget the most important participant. We encourage all conferences to include the student as well as the parent and teacher. We find that it is extremely effective and it keeps all participants honest.

Why shouldn't students hear, and have an opportunity to add to, the discussion of their academic growth? Too often in my experience I have seen teachers or parents take only a comment or rather insignificant portion of a conference and inflate it, far out of proportion to its real meaning, after a conference is over. If a child is to grow socially, emotionally and intellectually, he or she must be a vital participant in the evaluation of the process.

No matter what procedure you employ, someone will be dissatisfied.

In our district we have recently moved away from a graded report card, which had an additional provision for evaluating effort,

to a checklist of personal, social and academic characteristics and/or traits. Basically, students are evaluated on each trait as "satisfactory" or "needs improvement." In the junior high school, "superior" has been added to allow some further differentiation. These progress reports are made quarterly with a provision made for written comments to be added as a supplement to the trait checklist. Two of these four reports are given to parents during a parent-teacher-student conference. Basically, the procedure is an eclectic one, hoping to utilize the best aspects of a variety of approaches. We still have one step to go; one section to add.

During the past two years we have been moving toward an individualized curricular program. To date, our basic programs in reading, language arts and mathematics have been individualized. In each subject area our teachers have identified and sequenced basic skills to be attained by students. Learning packets have been developed to aid in the teaching of each of the basic skills in a variety of approaches and at varying levels. We believe this program is essential if we recognize that all children do not learn at the same rate, all children do not learn with equal ease, and all children do not learn with equal understanding.

In the development of this program, we were aided by Dr. Roger B. Worner,[2] who provided the model for our individualized program. To make our reporting procedure more effective, we must add one step which has been mandated by our curricular approach. Such a reporting procedure was inaugurated in the Kanawha County, West Virginia, Schools this year. In addition to our trait checklist, with comments, we must provide a summarization of the basic skills

attained by each child.

Far better than A, B, C or a "works up to capacity" comment, this report provides a visual record of the skills acquired over a period of a quarter or a school year. This tells the parent, in very specific form, just what skills the child has acquired as a result of his school work.

Is this the ideal report form? I doubt it. There must be, and will be, many modifications made over time.

Is it an effective form? You bet! It gives the teachers an opportunity to detail for parents the specific skills acquired during the reporting period. This is a device to specify student and teacher successes. This is real accountability. Not only will the parent know about what Susie or Johnny has learned, he may also begin to recognize the variety and complexity of skills that teachers are trying to help children learn.

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[1]Kirschenbaum, H.; Simon, S.; Napier, R. Wad ja Get? New York: Hart Publishing Co., Inc., 1971

[2]Worner, Roger B. Designing Curriculum for Educational Accountability. New York: Random House, Inc., 1973.